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The Future of Politics

Maghrebi Elites, the Pandemic and the Counter-Revolution
Political Economy

The term counter-revolution has gained prominence in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) since the early days of the so-called Arab Spring in 2011, when power-holding status quo actors sought to push back, undermine, or prevent political change away from authoritarianism. A decade later, such counter-revolutionary actors clearly had the upper hand across the core Maghreb: in 2021, Tunisia, the only beacon of democratic hope in the entire MENA region, began to see a sharp U-turn toward authoritarianism. Algeria’s ruling elites managed to weaken the Hirak mass protest movement, which in 2019 had made a peaceful attempt at altering the authoritarian status quo. In Morocco, the King’s political reform promise made in 2011 failed to materialize and was instead transformed into a development and modernization agenda. As a result, all three countries in 2021 fared worse in democracy and freedom indexes than only five years earlier.1

This article argues that to explain the most recent dynamics of counter-revolution in the Maghreb, we need to look beyond the narrow confines of the political sphere. Since the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, ruling elites have clearly used the situation to curb freedoms. They have also built on regional conflicts to boost nationalist reflexes and frame contesting actors as enemies of the nation. But understanding counter-revolutionary dynamics also calls for dissecting how ruling elites make use of domestic and regional economic set-ups and interests to consolidate their power and marginalize dissent. This can take different forms. Yet, in all three Maghreb countries, similar factors have fed counter-revolutionary dynamics. Namely and quite paradoxically, rampant corruption, governance failures, and economic crisis, exacerbated by the pandemic, have – at least in the short run – served those elites that are resisting democratic change. The consequent grievances opened the door for populist promises, discredited elected institutions, and enhanced a popular desire for strong leaders capable of delivering. Moreover, on the international level, the growing commercial and geopolitical interest in the Maghreb among external actors has been playing into the incumbent elites’ hands, consolidating their hold on power.

In all this, European states have not only been bystanders. Initial support for political reform soon relapsed into prioritizing security and stability in cooperation with the Maghreb states. As a consequence, Europeans have – arguably – involuntarily promoted counter-revolutionary orders and figures. Furthermore, they underestimated the political repercussions of authoritarian elite networks’ vested economic interests across the Maghreb and have shied away from addressing the latter. Yet, the road ahead may become rockier for counter-revolutionary forces. While authoritarian elites having managed to profit from the pandemic politically – and even from the related economic grievances – new economic shocks, such as rising food and gas prices induced by the Russian war against Ukraine, will further aggravate already strained socioeconomic situations. Even in Algeria, where high oil and gas prices are providing the ruling elite with a renewed – if potentially short – lifeline, a sustainable econom-

ic turn is not in sight. Thus, in all three Maghreb countries renewed revolutionary dynamics may be on the horizon, only this time they are likely to focus more on improved socioeconomic perspectives and better state services than on political system change. The question will then be if the counter-revolutionaries can deliver.

**Profiting from the Pandemic and Making Use of Economic Settings**

The pandemic presented both a challenge and an opportunity for ruling elites in the Maghreb. On the one hand, it bluntly exposed governance failures and became an additional burden for already strained state budgets. In Tunisia and Morocco, the strategic tourism sector was hit particularly hard by lockdowns and travel restrictions; in Algeria hydrocarbon revenues, the State’s most important source of income, dropped by 30% in 2020 compared to 2019 due to pandemic-related low oil and gas prices.\(^2\)

On the other hand, and arguably more importantly, the pandemic provided the chance to ban protests, enhance (digital) control of societies, promote national solidarity, make fundamental reform promises and display decisive leadership. Polls taken in the spring of 2020 during the first wave of the pandemic showed high popularity ratings in Tunisia for politicians and a government that took decisive and successful measures against Covid-19.\(^3\) Surveys published later in 2020 found that in Tunisia 61% and in Algeria almost half of those questioned favoured abandoning parliament and installing a strong leader.\(^4\) This stated preference became a reality in Tunisia less than a year later.

On 25 July 2021, the Tunisian President Kais Saied used the broad dissatisfaction over how the pandemic was managed to declare a state of emergency, fire the Prime Minister, dismiss the government, freeze parliamentary activity, engage the military in health affairs and rule by decree – to name but a few of the largely unconstitutional measures taken. In neighbouring Algeria, the pandemic prevented the Hirak protest movement from continuing its marches, and anti-Covid-19 measures served to contain and reduce the protests during contested parliamentary and local elections in 2021 to a minimum. In Morocco, media control was enhanced and, during the pandemic, digitalization once again proved a double-edged sword. The use of new smartphone applications to monitor and restrict citizens’ movements and transfer funds to the informal sector made sense in fighting the pandemic and its effects. At the same time it provided opportunities to enhance the surveillance of citizens.

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The pandemic thus appeared to promote authoritarian consolidation. Paradoxically, counter-revolutionary elites – at least initially – even managed to profit from what most likely would turn into their most serious challenge: the resulting dire economic situations.

**Successfully Shifting the Debate to Corruption and Development Promises**

Ruling elites in all three Maghreb countries sought to deflect responsibility away from themselves. They blamed predecessors for bad governance, engaged in high profile anti-corruption campaigns, and presented themselves as saviours. Tunisia’s new strongman, Kais Saied, brought this kind of manoeuvre to

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perfection. The President’s populist rhetoric, in order to justify his unconstitutional and increasingly authoritarian measures, played on popular frustration with a dysfunctional government and parliament, political parties in general and the Islamist Ennahdha in particular. These actors and institutions were broadly perceived as engaged primarily in power struggles and/or serving themselves. Thus, in the name of fighting corruption and bringing a “truly” democratic system to the Tunisian population, the President seized executive, legislative and judicial powers, and began to systematically dismantle constitutional institutions. Despite these brute measures he managed to maintain high popularity ratings for much longer than observers expected, even if his de facto ability to mobilize people remained rather limited.

In Morocco, voters ousted the Justice and Development Party (PJD), for a number of reasons. These include its then Secretary General, Prime Minister Saad Eddine El Othmani, being forced to sign the normalization deal with Israel and the party’s former and very popular leader having been successfully undermined by the King. But arguably the main reason was that the PJD had not managed to deliver what citizens expected, particularly during the pandemic. The King seized the opportunity to intervene. He set up an emergency fund and sidelined the government. The monarchy, which, since 2013, had been increasingly steering the public debate away from political reform and towards modernization and development, in the autumn of 2021, sought to rally the nation around a new development model, the creation of which had been announced prior to the pandemic. However, the socioeconomic effects of the pandemic and its blunt exposure of deficits in health and other critical infrastructure played into the monarchy’s logic of seeking to upgrade the authoritarian system to provide citizens with decent services, better infrastructure and socioeconomic opportunity, while curbing their political freedoms, thereby aspiring to a system of “benevolent authoritarianism” resembling certain Asian governance models.

Only the Algerian incumbent elite failed to instrumentalize the health crisis to boost its contested legitimacy. President Tebboune’s main strategy was to arrest and blame corrupt elites from the previous Bouteflika era and to engage in reform rhetoric. From late 2021, with oil and gas prices on the rise again, pressure for fundamental reform away from the hydrocarbon-dependent rentier model dwindled. The boost in state revenues allowed for the creation of an unemployment benefit programme and the reversal of austerity measures in February 2022, announced only a few months earlier, such as new taxes on foodstuffs and electronics. The new measures were likely designed to prevent protest in view of rising prices and to pre-empt broad support for a potential new wave of Hirak-related contestation.

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As citizens across the Maghreb, in the third year of the pandemic, struggled to make ends meet in their daily lives, there was little sign of a broad mobilization for political (system) change – even as protests against governments due to skyrocketing food prices were on the rise. In Tunisia, a fragmented opposition managed to bring only a few thousand protesters onto the streets to demonstrate against the President, and mobilization in Algeria and Morocco in support of a growing number of political prisoners took place mainly among activists, but did not translate into a broader movement.

**Old Networks and Reflexes Undermining Reform**

Even when far-reaching reform promises were made, their implementation was far from certain. Vested economic interests hampered the political will to ac-
tually or fully implement reforms – in some cases, such reform could threaten activities of the very elites that had promised them. The Moroccan monarchy’s dominance in the economy is but one example. The country’s largest economic conglomerates remain in its hands, and members of the elite close to the Palace, such as Prime Minister Aziz Akhannouch, are among the wealthiest people in the country. Hence, conflicts of interest are unavoidable when it comes to establishing full economic competition and financial transparency. This presents a challenge for full-fledged private sector development, as it establishes a glass ceiling for economic actors with no ties to the Palace.

In Algeria, vested elite interests were shaken during and in the aftermath of the 2019 Hirak protests, as civil and military protagonists of the Bouteflika years ended up in prison on charges of corruption or conspiracy against the State. Yet, this did not result in the emergence of new reform-oriented elites. Rather, counter-revolutionary elites, sidelined by the former President and his entourage, were able to make a comeback. And it is not only the composition of the High Security Council that testifies to this. Algeria’s deep state has an enormous repertoire of actors, and its nature – competing clientelist networks composed of military, private sector, administrative and political elites – means that change merely implies *alternance* within the system and thus path dependency. Given the age of major decision-makers – the President, the Head of the Army, members of the High Security Council as well as senior advisors and political figures are all in their 70s or 80s – it appears logical that none of these actors wants to rock the boat, politically or economically. This implies abstaining from deep fiscal and economic reform or energy sector transformation toward renewables. Elites of the old system did not appear to focus primarily on undermining the democratic process, but did tend towards supporting parties protecting elites of the old system. In 2022, this was the Free Destourian Party (PDL), which was founded by members of former dictator Ben Ali’s party and fuelled nostalgia for the good old days. Even if Kais Saied appeared to show an interest in dismantling monopolistic and/or corrupt economic networks and issued decrees targeting them, his modus operandi resembled the policies of the former dictator: instrumentalizing the judiciary, involving security sector actors and using state media to campaign against “traitors.” The latter included all actors fundamentally opposing his measures and whom he sought to exclude from participating in any national dialogue on Tunisia’s future. In doing so, the counter-revolutionary President, who saw himself as a revolutionary but had no organized political basis, ended up relying on elites of the authoritarian Ben Ali regime.

**External Actors Feeding Counter-Revolutionary Dynamics**

Research over the past decade has widely documented how different Gulf states have sought to influence the course of the 2011 revolutions in the MENA region. In the Maghreb, even if less ostentatiously than in Egypt, the UAE and Saudi Arabia were also pushing their counter-revolutionary agendas. After 2011, the UAE and Saudi Arabia were not forthcoming with financial support to Tunisia, mainly due to the Islamist Ennahdha’s participation in government. After 25 July 2021, not surprisingly, both the UAE and Saudi Arabia, even if to varying degrees, expressed support for Kais Saied’s moves targeting Ennahda. Shortly before 25 July, Riyadh promised the Tunisian President a donation of much-needed vaccinations and medical equipment, which was then distributed after Kais Saied’s power

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grab.⁷ Both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi also made financial promises to Tunisia after 25 July, but apparently have been asked to hold back by the US.⁸ The Moroccan monarchy, while having experienced hiccups in the past with the Emirates and Saudi Arabia, has nevertheless received strong backing from not only these two countries, but all of those that form the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). They have offered their symbolic support by siding with Morocco on the Western Sahara question, and have also given financial backing. In 2011, when the North African monarchy was confronted with substantial protests, the Gulf countries pledged billions of dollars in financial aid to Morocco, and have apparently invested heavily in the Moroccan security sector in the past decade, even if exact figures regarding these donations are difficult to obtain.⁹

Finally, in Algeria, counter-revolutionary influence from the Gulf countries has been more marginal, as the oil-exporting country was not in need of financial support. Yet, perceptions of external meddling played a role throughout the Hirak mass protests and beyond. There was a widespread fear of Emirati and Saudi support to the regime. At the same time, rumours of support from Turkey and Qatar, two actors considered “pro-revolutionary” in Algeria, to Islamists close to the former Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), which has been banned since 1991, and even to the separatist Movement for the self-determination of Kabylie (MAK), surfaced in 2001. Regardless of where they originated, the Algerian government strongly promoted such rumours in order to spread fear and discredit the Hirak, by insinuating its Islamist takeover. Hence, in this context, Qatar’s – perceived or real – activities served to discredit the Hirak movement as a “revolutionary” actor. In the Tunisian case, both Qatar and Turkey condemned President Saied’s power grab and overtly anti-Islamist agenda after 25 July 2021. Yet, it is open to debate whether this was done with the goal of supporting democratic competition or whether it was more about giving their clients a place within systems, that is, not about the systems per se – at least, this is what Qatar’s close and growing economic ties with Algeria and Morocco would insinuate, as both these countries have inserted Islamist actors into their clientelist authoritarian systems.

The presence – albeit to very different degrees – of two other regional actors, Israel and Iran, also serves the authoritarian status quo in Morocco and Algeria. Israeli-Moroccan security cooperation gives the Palace a boost and strengthens its military and surveillance capacities. While parts of the population reject normalization with Israel, the fact that it was linked to US recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara helped prevent its broad contestation. At the same time, Algeria’s decision-makers in the military and Presidency used the Moroccan-Israeli normalization to play on (real) fears in the population about the Zionist enemy standing on the countries’ western borders in order to unite the population around the regime, and to frame contesters as a threat to national unity and as being supported by foreign powers. Conversely, the Moroccan elites’ threat perception and narrative to rally the population focuses on an alleged Algeria-Iran axis and related Iranian support to the Polisario via Algeria.¹⁰ More generally, Morocco and Algeria’s strained relations, which resulted in Algeria cutting diplomatic ties between the two countries in the summer of 2021, serve the elites in both countries to consolidate their domestic power.

Last but not least, Maghrebi elites could count on implicit or explicit support from China and Russia, the two most important non-Western and non-regional actors present in the Maghreb. Russia’s activities have – due to the Cold War and the non-aligned movement – focused strongly on Algeria, with which it maintains a strategic partnership. Cooperation focuses primarily on the security and energy sectors – both domains that are key for maintaining the authoritarian status quo in Algeria. During the Hirak, Moscow repeatedly made overt gestures of support

⁸ Author’s interviews with Tunisian officials and foreign diplomats, Tunis November 2021 and March 2022.
to the regime. Morocco and Tunisia’s ruling elites, in their efforts to diversify international cooperation and trade, have also built closer relations with Russia. Moreover, Morocco’s no-show for the UN vote on Russia’s attack on Ukraine in March 2022, is evidence of Rabat’s efforts not to alienate the UN Security Council veto power on the monarchy’s key foreign policy issue: the quest for international recognition of Western Sahara as Moroccan territory. The latter also has a vital domestic function in rallying power around the monarchy. China, for its part, has included all three Maghreb countries in its Belt and Road Initiative, has been investing in port infrastructure and is focusing increasingly on Morocco as a platform for production and a gateway to export toward sub-Saharan Africa. Moreover, Maghrebi governments’ contracts with the Chinese technology company Huawei may provide them with access to surveillance technology from China. The effects of Beijing’s engagement are potentially twofold. Firstly, its economic investments require stability, which implies backing the status quo, and, secondly, its technological support can help authoritarian regimes to keep contesting actors in check.

Europeans: Involuntary Counter-Revolutionaries?

Maghrebi elites with counter-revolutionary agendas could also rely on Europe, despite the European Union (EU) and some of its Member States seeking to promote democratic processes and structures. European fears of regional instability, after the “revolutions” in Libya, Syria and Yemen ended in civil wars, and of renewed migration, after the so-called migration crisis in 2015, was useful for Maghrebi incumbents. Rabat has played this card particularly well with its neighbour, Spain. Algerian elites in the course of the Hirak protests banked on the fact that European policy makers want clear roadmaps and support elections, if even both process and outcome question the legitimacy of the ruling elite. Tunisia’s post-2011 governments finally knew that they could count on the democratization rent. Kais Saied could not do so, but post-25 July European policymakers initially hoped that more decisive leadership could pave the way to implementing reforms that a dysfunctional government and parliament had not been able to do.

Counter-revolutionary actors in all three states have an Achilles heel: the economy

Maghrebi elites have also understood that European priorities have moved toward green agendas and that Europe is looking to North Africa for renewable energies, namely green hydropower, and, in the context of the Russian invasion in Ukraine, to diversify its energy producers. Morocco, for more than a decade, has assumed a role as one of the champions of renewables on the African continent, and this too has served to silence external criticism of diminishing domestic freedoms. Algeria has understood that it can play a vital role in the future of European energy security, and that its opaque nature and sovereignty reflex are an asset – Europeans rarely dare to criticize domestic policies. Moroccan and Tunisian elites have learned from Algeria and are reacting increasingly strongly to anyone perceived as meddling in domestic affairs. The cumulated effect of these dynamics is that Europe has unwittingly contributed to the (re-)consolidation of authoritarian regimes. Yet, counter-revolutionary actors in all three states have an Achilles heel: the economy. For one, because none of the economies in the short and medium term produces enough output to satisfy populations and offset the growing degree of authoritarianism. Second, because it is the domain where European countries have both leverage – funds and trade – as well as a lever – their voting right in the IMF’s Executive Board – to induce reforms that may generate spillover effects for political dynamics. Enhancing financial transparency and accountability, rule-based transactions and domestic economic competition in the Maghreb offers the best chances of weakening deep state networks – and, over time, pushing back counter-revolutions.